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ABSTRACT

How educational leaders can be prepared to carry out their responsibilities in an effective and sensitive fashion is explored in the context of an urban, diverse school environment by describing the Assistant Principal Leadership Academy of the Ysleta Independent School District, El Paso (Texas). The Academy is a unique professional development program that is tailored specifically to the needs of assistant principals so that they can eventually become effective principals. The Ysleta schools have been committed to the belief that educational change begins with changes in educational leadership, and that the principal must be the central actor in efforts to respond to the needs of all students, especially poor and minority students in the Ysleta district, which borders on Mexico. Over 85 percent of students in the Ysleta district are minorities, about 65 percent are low income, and about 60 percent are of limited English proficiency or do not speak English. The main goal of the Assistant Principal Leadership Academy is to commit, plan for, and implement change in schools through preparation of assistant principals. Partnership with the University of Texas, El Paso and the creation of learning opportunities mean that assistant principals receive instruction that is committed to the fundamental issues of change and improvement for urban minority students. Providing assistant principals with mentors is an important part of providing the support administrators need. Specific professional development goals of assistant principals are identified and promoted as a first step in a comprehensive process of leadership development. (SLD)

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DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN URBAN, DIVERSE SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN URBAN, DIVERSE SCHOOL SYSTEMS

The issue of "borders" and their impact upon educational practice has been described and defined in a variety of ways through many papers and presentations at this conference. In some cases, borders are seen as ideological barriers separating scholarly perspectives. In other cases, borders are seen as imaginary stages in career paths: "Borders" exist between the role of he classroom teacher and the principal. Borders are the metaphor utilized to describe the separation of ethnic, racial, or gender groupings in society. In this presentation, we look at a much more traditional notion of borders. Here, our focus is on the land which forms a common ground between two different nations. Here, discussions of border issues is not symbolic, psychological, or ideological. Instead, it is a daily reality of life where two cultures come together or clash in a constant matching across imaginary geopolitical boundaries.

It is in this context that we consider the unique features of how educational leaders can be prepared to carry out their responsibilities in an effective and sensitive fashion. We wish to consider the following as questions to guide our conversation:

- ***What does it take to build a leadership development program so strong and so inviting that a large number of school***

administrators--particularly assistant principals could be prepared to become successful educational leaders for the 21st Century?

- ***Are there unique characteristics of this leadership development process based on the fact that administrators serve in a diverse, urban community located on an international boundary?***

As a away to prompt further dialogue, we frame the conversation by describing the nature of the environment in which the leadership development effort. Two years ago, the Ysleta Independent School District, one of three school systems which comprise the El Paso, Texas metropolitan area, made an effort to address the challenges of leadership development by creating the Assistant Principal Leadership Academy, a unique professional development program tailored specifically to meet the needs of assistant principals so that they could eventually become effective principals of the district's elementary, middle, and high schools. Increasing opportunities for professional development for assistant principals has been a major focus for initiatives that have been intended to bring about dramatic and sustained school improvement efforts throughout the district. The Ysleta Schools have been deeply committed to a core belief that educational change must begin with change in educational leadership, and the value that the principal must be the central actor in all efforts to enhance the quality of schooling by responding to the needs of all students, particularly poor and minority students who live in this community located directly on the US border with Mexico.

Background

El Paso, Texas is a part of a rapidly growing binational, bicultural community. With a population of approximately 600,000, it is the fourth largest city in Texas, and one of the state's fastest growing metropolitan areas. Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, directly across the Rio Grande, has a population of over 1.2 million, creating a binational metropolitan area of approximately two million people. El Paso is at the forefront of demographic trends that are rapidly changing the face of US society. The population of El Paso is currently estimated to be 70 percent Hispanic, 23 percent non-Hispanic White, 4 percent African American, and 1 percent Asian. Almost one-fourth of El Paso's population is foreign born, and over 50 percent of El Paso's households speak Spanish as the primary language of preference. El Paso is also a young city, with a median age of 25 years, compared with the state average of 28 years. Because the younger age brackets tend to be more Hispanic in composition, public school enrollments in El Paso County, a large geographic region with 10 public school districts, range from 75 percent to 98 percent Hispanic.

El Paso is a city with both immense problems and enormous promise. An estimated 30 percent of the adult population is functionally illiterate. The El Paso area is one of the poorest metropolitan regions in the United States: A recent ranking of per capita income in major US metropolitan areas identified El Paso as the fifth poorest among the 317 largest areas. Almost 27 percent of all El Paso County residents live below the poverty line. For children, that figure is even worse; 36 percent are described as poor. Historically, 10 to 11 percent of the population is unemployed. With the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), however, El Paso could be poised on the brink of major economic

development. But NAFTA will lead to economic growth in the region only if El Paso can produce more highly skilled, academically prepared, and competent workers.

Like the city of El Paso, the Ysleta Independent School District, one of the eight largest school districts in the state of Texas, also faces great challenges. But it is also committed to and already undertaking systemic reform. Ysleta ISD enrolls nearly 48,000 students in 55 schools. Over 85 percent of the students are underrepresented minorities. Approximately 65 percent are low income, and well over 60 percent of the students enter the system with limited, or no English proficiency. There is also the knowledge that academic achievement, as measured by a variety of indicators such as high school graduation rates, standardized test performance, and retention rates in colleges, is unacceptably low. In addition, the many special programs that are designed to bridge the achievement gap, as wonderful and effective as they may be for some students, have simply not been powerful enough to counteract much of the pressures and realities faced by students so that the schooling experience for the bulk of ethnic minority and poor students in the Ysleta ISD is a significant and ongoing challenge.

Katy Haycock, president of the Washington-based Education trust (Haycock, 1997) recently noted the following characteristics of education provided to students in El Paso and other similar urban border communities:

- While American students as a whole are not performing at levels consistent with ability, minority and poor youngsters are performing at levels even more inconsistent with ability levels. Indeed, the average 17 year old minority student living in poverty in border communities is more typically performing at levels consistent with 13 year olds nationwide.

- The reason for this inconsistency happens not because Hispanic, African American, Native American, or poor White children lack the "English gene," the "History gene," the "math or science gene," or because poverty has damaged them so severely or because they cannot speak English fluently. Instead, the gap between ability and performance comes from systematic lack of attention to effective teaching to that population.
- Inequities exist at least in part because of a terrible silence that surrounds the children--a silence allowed to exist by many public school leaders who consistently believe that they are not responsible for providing remedies to the serious inequities which exist in the system because, "After all, these kids are doing about as well as can be expected." On the whole, we expect very little from poor and minority youngsters, and as a result, we often get what we expect.

Anthony J. Trujillo, Superintendent of the Ysleta ISD, recognized the facts identified through the work of Haycock and others and decided that. instead of following traditional practice of providing the district with a crazy quilt of special programs or single issued-focused, one shot" or pilot improvement efforts, the district would work to turn around student performance and achievement levels by engaging in a comprehensive and dramatic redesign of all elements of the schooling process. The Ysleta ISD adopted a vision calling for all students who graduate to be prepared to enter four year colleges or universities. A key and fundamental element of change and improvement in the district has been a commitment to the development and support for visionary principals who would be dedicated to take on

the biggest challenges and risks associated with creating more effective schools for children who reside in this diverse urban community on the border. Preparing principals to be not only competent survivors, but effective leaders who would be true advocates of student learners has become a powerful focus for the district's professional development efforts.

Preparation for the Principalship

Six factors have contributed to the decision in Ysleta to invest heavily in the professional development of assistant principals as a strategy to bring about long term school change and improvement:

1. Traditionally, more than 95 percent of the principals in the Ysleta ISD served as assistant principals in the district prior to assuming their first principalship.
2. Over 80 percent of the assistant principals are Hispanic and are products of the school systems in the El Paso area.
3. Many of the assistant principals, along with other school leaders, hold low expectations about what poor and minority students must know and be able to do.
4. The generally inadequate preparation of elementary, middle, and high school principals.
5. The often nonexistent or low quality and fragmented nature of professional development opportunities for assistant principals.
6. The lack of authentic principal-type leadership tasks and responsibilities traditionally assigned to assistant principals.

The major goal of the Ysleta Assistant Principal Leadership Academy has been to build the capacity of school leaders to commit to, plan for, and implement

change in schools. It is critical that school leaders would not get misdirected by issues common to a border community such as El Paso: poverty, unemployment. limited English proficiency, and general beliefs about poor and minority parents who do not care about what happens to their children. These issues can consume educators to the point that attention may be lost as to what is truly important in schools. Effective school leaders must refuse to make or accept excuses attributed to "the border" as solitary explanations for students' low performance. Preparation for the principalship must center around fundamental issues of the purpose of schooling. Attention must be directed toward an appreciation that teaching is a moral endeavor and all students must have access to knowledge and opportunities to excel through school. Leaders must learn to create inclusive and supportive academic programs in climates where people are receptive to change. They are willing to make change themselves and remain committed to the search for constant improvement. Future principals need to be excited about the possibilities of creating good schools which foster high expectations based on a commitment to high academic standards for all students at every level of schooling. They must believe that all teachers, parents, and students know what these standards are. In short principals, as instructional leaders, are responsible for ensuring that all students are exposed to a challenging curriculum. If the district is committed to the belief that all students should go to college, then true effort must be directed to preparing all students for college. In turn, principals must make certain that all children interact with expert teachers who are provide with district-supported professional development. Schools are not places to keep poor, disadvantaged "border kids." Instead, they become models of learning communities. All of this is

supported by principals who value their own education and serve as the "Number One Learners" in their schools.

In order to achieve the goal of helping current assistant principals become the kinds of future principals who reflect these skills, attitudes, and values, the following activities and strategies have been incorporated as part of the Ysleta Assistant Principal Leadership Academy:

- Establishment of a strong partnership with the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at the University of Texas at El Paso, the institution of higher education which has traditionally provided administrative preparation coursework for more than 75 percent of the school leaders in the El Paso area. The commitment of the University involves providing a faculty member who understands the need to change attitudes, beliefs, and expectations as an ongoing resource and critical friend to the assistant principals.
- Creation of learning opportunities that go beyond the regular monthly information seminars of the past. Among other aspects of these learning experiences are structured, bi-monthly visits to other campuses that are committed to the fundamental issues of change.
- Providing assistant principals with mentors to serve as role models and peer coaches who possess high expectations for performance in their own school communities, who have commonly articulated beliefs that all students, regardless of

background and economic status, can achieve at high levels, and who are implementing standards-based curricula at their schools.

- Giving assistant principals the support they need in order to become better learners and, as a result, good principals by extending their knowledge base through directed scholarly readings and discussions with visiting educators such as Asa Hilliard, Roland Barth, Michael Fullan, and Roger Soder. In addition, focused inservice sessions have been directed toward such issues as systems theory, small schools, standards-based teaching and learning, high school reform (*Breaking Ranks*), and whatever the group identifies as relevant to their task of changing the system of schooling into an effective system of learning.
- Identifying specific professional development needs of individual assistant principals as well as the entire Academy through the use of the National Association of Elementary School Principals' (NAESP) *Professional Development Inventory (PDI)*, a process which looks at leadership skills in terms of the following thirteen domains:

1. ***Planning*** *(Defining purpose and setting organizational goals)*
2. ***Organizing*** *(Defining tasks to be completed in various activities and sequencing events)*
3. ***Problem Solving*** *(Analyzing problems effectively and reaching logical conclusions)*

4. ***Creativity*** *(Demonstrating innovation and inventiveness in work related situations)*
5. ***Decisiveness*** *(Rendering timely and appropriate decisions)*
6. ***Systems Analysis and Design*** *(Integrating various organizational components into a coherent, effective operational pattern)*
7. ***Vision*** *(Possessing a clear and positive view of the past, present, and future of the school)*
8. ***Communications*** *(Processing messages with precise understanding)*
9. ***Instructional Leadership*** *(Working effectively with the school community to enhance student learning)*
10. ***Group Leadership and Team Building*** *(Mobilizing others to collaborate in accomplishing school goals and solving problems)*
11. ***Climate Development*** *(Shaping the psycho-social environment of the school to promote accomplishment of the mission)*
12. ***Moral Responsibility*** *(Demonstrating universally held core values and beliefs)*
13. ***Instructional Analysis and Supervision*** *(Maintaining a focus on student achievement)*

Completion of the PDI is only the first step in a more comprehensive process of leadership development which involves individual goal setting by assistant

principals based on feedback received from a facilitator who works with each individual to appreciate what the results of the assessment process might mean in terms of professional development.

The Ysleta Assistant Principals Leadership Academy is generally accepted as a valuable resource to help future campus leaders learn the requisite skills needed to serve as competent principals. However, much more can be done to relate what we have attempted to as a professional development model to a program to promote greater student achievement in a border, urban community such as El Paso. As a result, we now turn to a consideration of our opening questions again as a way to prompt further dialogue and conversation with educational researchers and practitioners who share our interests in finding appropriate ways to prepare educational leaders for the challenges of an important but frequently unknown part of the world.